

Solid Waste Management Department

Household Hazardous Waste: Cleaning up Mercury Spills & Broken Fluorescent Bulbs



Cleaning Mercury Spills

Mercury is present in a variety of products such as thermometers and fluorescent bulbs. If you should accidentally break a single mercury-containing item at home, don't panic. The amount of mercury in one single home product is very small.

Any time one pound or more of mercury is released to the environment, it's mandatory to call the National Response Center (NRC) at (800) 424-8802. The NRC hotline operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Because mercury is very heavy, only two tablespoons of mercury weigh about one pound.

Discard any clothing that came into direct contact with mercury beads, mercury powder, or glass fragments that contained the mercury. You can, however, wash clothing or other materials that have been only exposed to the mercury vapor, such as clothing you happened to be wearing when you cleaned up the spilled mercury, as long as that clothing has not come into direct contact with the materials from the broken bulb. Vacuuming or broom sweeping is never recommended for mercury clean-up.

Broken Thermometers

Mercury can move surprising distances on hard-flat surfaces, so be sure to inspect the entire room.

- Open a window and leave the room for 15 minutes or more.
- Put on disposal gloves.
- Carefully pick up pieces of glass or sharp objects and place them on a paper towel.
- Fold the paper towel and place it in a zip lock bag.
- Use a plastic squeegee or stiff cardboard to gather mercury beads.
- Use a slow sweeping motion to keep mercury from becoming uncontrollable.
- Take a flashlight, hold it at a low angle close to the floor in a dark room and look for additional glistening beads of mercury that may be sticking to the surface or in small cracked areas of the surface.
- If available, an eyedropper can be useful in collecting mercury beads.

- Slowly draw up the mercury beads and release them on a damp paper towel.
- Place the paper towel in a zip lock bag and secure.
- After you remove the larger beads of mercury, use duct tape to collect smaller hard-to-see beads.
- You can also use a tiny amount of shaving cream on top of a small paint brush to gently "dot" the affected area and pick up smaller hard-to-see beads.
- Double bag all the mercury related waste.
- If used, the paintbrush and eye dropper should be disposed of as well.

The double bagged waste may be disposed of with your regular household garbage or taken to the HHW facility.

Cleaning Broken Fluorescent Bulbs

CFLs and other fluorescent bulbs do contain small amounts of mercury. However, if you should accidentally break one, don't panic. The amount of mercury in one single bulb is very small. Any story you might have heard about the EPA requiring expensive hazardous remediation is a hoax. The clean up guidelines below come from the EPA.

- Open a window and leave the room for 15 minutes or more.
- If you have them available, wear some disposable rubber gloves.
- Carefully scoop up the fragments and powder with stiff paper or cardboard and place them in a sealed plastic bag.
- If the break occurred on carpeting try using duct tape or a similar sticky material to collect the debris. I
- If you must use a vacuum, dispose of the vacuum bag when done, or wipe down the inside of the canister vacuum.
- Wipe the area clean with damp paper towels or disposable wet wipes and place them in the plastic bag as well.
- Place the first bag in a second sealed plastic bag and place it in your outdoor trash can.

It may be disposed of with regular household garbage.